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Coal slurry ponds and distance education

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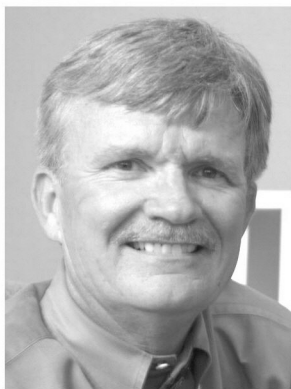
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And Finally . . .

Coal Slurry Ponds and Quality Indicators

Michael Simonson

I have a friend who says her favorite cable TV viewing is the History Channel. This is what she tunes in when there is nothing else she wants to watch. She says that almost every program is interesting. She even mentioned a recent broadcast about coal slurry ponds—those ponds used to hold the water run-off from coal cleansing operations. Apparently, there are hundreds of



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these ponds in the coal mining regions of Pennsylvania and West Virginia. She said she turned on the History Channel and, the next thing she knew, she was sitting down and watching the entire program. She is now an expert on coal slurry ponds. Go figure!

Actually, there is something important about this for distance educators, too. Most of us have watched the History Channel—a polished editing of what appears to be old, public domain films tied together with an artful narration. Almost always, the programs are informative, persuasive, and entertaining. They are well done and, by TV production standards, at a very low cost.

Recently, there has been in the distance education field a groundswell of interest in what some call “best practices” and others label “quality indicators.” Research has been conducted, reports have been written, and a few courses have even been redesigned. In most instances, the list of quality indicators includes the following characteristics:

- The course is designed in a logical and intuitive manner, which usually means “chunking” of

topics, often into modules and units

- Multimedia are used to present content
- Delivery of content is visually appealing, even attractive
- The course is content rich—a great deal of information about the course’s topic is included
- The course provides for easy, quick, and meaningful interaction
- The course is structured, but allows for self-pacing
- Designers and instructors are constantly critiquing and revising the course

Lists of “best practices” are often concluded with summary statements about the course being informative, interesting (even inspiring), and certainly memorable. Well-designed courses, like programs on the History Channel, draw learners in and keep them engaged. The “story” is interesting and keeps the learner motivated.

And finally, high quality distance education is obvious. You really do not need checklists or rating scales. When you see quality, you know it. If coal slurry ponds can be presented in a way that is informative and interesting, then . . . !